Gullah Geechee Visuality as Protest Art, Contemplative Practice, and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

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This article centers two fabric assemblage pieces I created in response to the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer 2020: the first piece made specifically in response to the murder of Breonna Taylor. In 2021, I completed the second piece—her male counterpart—created with similar methodology and materiality, in recognition of the long history of Black men who lost their lives and or were/are impacted by police brutality, specifically Sgt. Issac Woodard. I believe that as a proverbial Black collective we continue to be linked, in equal parts, by both collective memory and concurrent triumphs. Here, as critical arts-based research, I meditate on the sources of the work and unpack Gullah Geechee cultural traditions which intuitively informed my art. Lastly, as a former art teacher, current university professor and longtime artist with periods of hiatus, I conclude by positing implications for the field of art education.

Journey to the Work: Afro-Indigenous Epistemologies

I am a version of what Green (2019) calls a "Gullah Descendent….those who have not been connected to the low country and have recently learned of their kinship ties to the Gullah community through historical and genealogical research" (p. 575). When my late paternal granddad (see Figure 2)—a strong, generous, handsome, family-oriented central South Carolina native—was still living, he proudly proclaimed (Gullah) Geechee heritage and bore the phenotypical markers to prove it. Also, from my childhood memory scape, he had a variegated accent or dialect. Grandaddy Brown didn't share much of his past or family histo-

Figure 1

Note. (Left) *Variations on a Theme* and (right) *Pre and Post Breonna Taylor: Clothes you Can't Remove*. Kathy J.Brown (2020-2021), hand sewn fabric assemblages/collages with wire and zipper on readymade mannequin busts.

ry—at least not with me, one of his several grandchildren. Although my father grew up with his dad in the home, even he doesn't know much about his father's past. We do know that my paternal grandad and grandmother left small town South Carolina for auto plant jobs and opportunity. They moved their young family to mid-century Detroit as part of the Great Migration. There they purchased a home and raised a family in a thriving, family-centric, working and middle-class, segregated enclave on Detroit's east side dubbed The Black Bottom. While my maternal line migrated from Mississippi and Missouri, they settled in the same neighborhood. Years later, The Bottom was dismantled in the name of urban renewal which was often synonymous with "Negro removal" (Weber-Davis, 2015, para. 26) when Highway 75 was con-

structed as part of the "slum clearance" urban planning movement (Weber-Davis, 2015, para. 15). Because I don't know all of his story, I am making the assumption that he may have kept his memories safely tucked away because undoubtedly racialized trauma was embedded in his southern farmer experience, alongside determination, intelligence, resilience, diligence, pride, and ingenuity.

Figure 2
My paternal grandad, Joseph

My family's story, like many others, is a fragmented American story of unnamed or newly discovered ancestors, steeped in both tragedy and success. In recent years, to mitigate my lack of knowledge about my lineage, I embarked on genealogical tracings using the website ancestry.com and cross-referenced other websites and online documentation. I found my paternal great-grandfather, who was born in Charleston, South Carolina, which is geographically and culturally part of the coastal Low Country. Unable to locate more information about my great-grandparents, we surmised that the Gullah Geechee bloodline runs through my paternal great-grandad Ben. Whether Ben's lineage

was from the South Carolina Sea Islands is unknown. For this exploration, I focus on the South Carolina Gullah Geechee because we know with certainty that's where my Grandad was born and grew up.

The massive protests during the summer of 2020 (re)ignited collective, internalized angst bubbling not far beneath the surface. As a Black scholar, I immediately began contemplating alternative strategies to further the movement—in my classroom curricula, in a co-collaborated an anti-racist virtual panel series (Onstead Institute, 2021/2022), and in my making. I foreground art making because the vicissitude of life necessitates calming strategies and mechanisms, and creativity has always been a restorative praxis for me. Thusly, this writing responds to the journal's theme entitled *Black Engagement with Art as Contemplative Practice*. I unpack my points of reflection in three parts: (a) the experience of making, (b) cultural research, and (c) implications on my field. More specifically, I examine my experience with making as mediation, rage depository, and embodied catharsis, while unpacking generative themes (Freire, 1990) of Black American family lineage.

My method of qualitative inquiry is arts-based research (ABR) in the vein of Rolling (2016) who described ABR as the process of "abducting from lived experiences and contextual relationships what I would term as 'differences in interpretation' and thereby privileging improvisational creative activity" (p. 4). ABR foregrounds making as a mode of inquiry and rigorous site of investigation. Rolling continued, "…because we are surrounded by the processes and products of arts-based systems for making our socially agreed meanings, acquired knowledge, and cultural values visible and transferable surround us" (p. 4). I also consider ABR as research in which we can situate ourselves, our knowledge production, materiality, visualities, and contexts. Furthermore, *visuality* can be defined as "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein … and how it is seen are culturally constructed" (Rose, 2001, p. 6, citing Foster, 1988a: ix). Here I use the term visuality to unpack my own seeing, and an exploration of the Gullah Geechee culture through three different gazes: (a) my own as a distant "[grand]daughter of the dust" (Dash, 1991); (b) from lens of a cultural researcher; and (c) the unseeing of the Gullah Geechee culture within the field of art education.

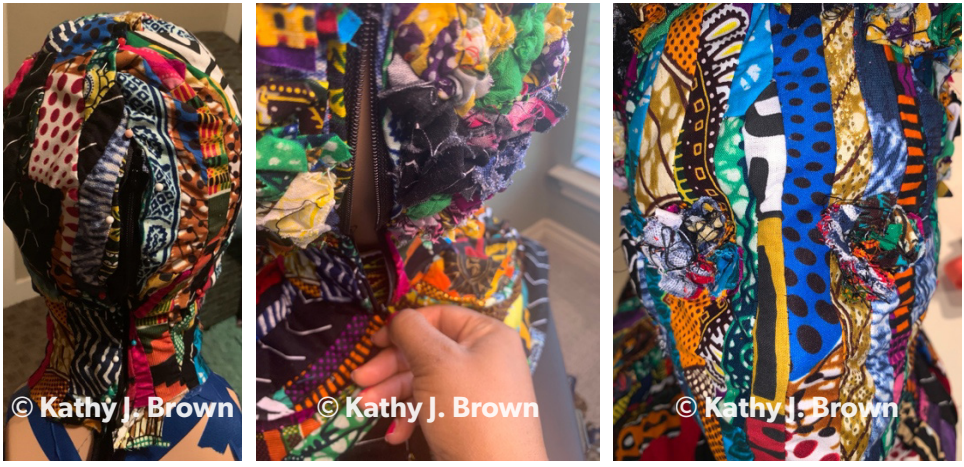
My work started out of necessity while in quarantine in the late spring/early summer of 2020. I started sewing again and experimenting with different patterns while making masks to donate to charity, family and friends. I hadn't made art in any form in quite a while, and had not previously employed sewing as an art medium. The culmination of protest images, oral and written stories on constant social media loops and TV coverage, alongside conversations with loved ones, fueled a shapeshift in my sewing practice and purpose. An image began to form in my mind: a sculpture of a female figure donning a head wrap—a crown of sorts—to represent everyday Black women—an homage to Breonna. I was inspired by artists such as Nick Cave's afrofuturistic Sound Suits, sculptural head wraps by Dallas-based fibers artist Chesley Antionette, and song lyrics. Moreover, as I further reflected on my histography, I sought to draw connections between my present-day practice and my family lineage because the figure's "skin garment" unintentionally morphed into quilting qualities, although I am not a quilter (see Figures 10 & 11).

I purchased authentic Africa print and faux African-inspired fabric from local stores and started cutting into strips and shapes, then experimented with juxtaposing patterns—I was subconsciously employing principles of *strip quilting* (see Figure 12). I started to tailor the hand sewn fabric collage segments to fit the plastic readymade mannequin form, subsequently adding a zipper to the "skin garment" (see Figures 3-5). As I let the textiles lead me and create on their own, the approach was embodied improvisation. My interaction with the materials and the process of sewing was therapeutic and felt like my own piece of the revolution. The physicality of cutting the fabrics, laying them side by side, in analogous relation to one another, binding the pieces with thread in anticipation of what path they might take, was a reflective experience. As I began engaging with my past, wrestling with my present and recognizing how they inform my afro-future, I revisited my ancestors and researched traditions of the Gullah Geechee peoples to understand if and how tacit epistemologies informed my work (see Figures 10-11).

My Making Experience

Sewing is utilitarian, but also a mindful, peaceful process. The tactility of needle and thread, fabrics and texture, communing to create a finished product or experience a process of practice, is rooted in repetition and rhythm. Yen (n.d.) surmised, "Repetition is a key component of the relaxation response, because it appears to pull us into the present moment" (para. 5). As the maker, cutting fabric (see Figures 8 & 9), pinning and hand sewing one section at a time reminded me that Black women have had a centuries-old relationship with needle work and material manipulation. Contemporary artists such as Bisa Butler, and Faith Ringgold before her, have embraced and elevated the medium. For me, experimenting with fiber arts, interacting with the materials was an active part of allowing the fabric to move and form on its own. Rolling (2016) describes this as "the arts are also a socio-biological imperative through which to aggregate, accommodate, and assimilate ways of thinking not our own" (p. 4). As the piece progressed, moving through stages via draping, tucking, measuring over and around the plastic forms, the purpose to the making coalesced—providing me catharsis and a voice. Each fabric section of the figures involved processes that forced me to confront my intentionality and artistic choices.

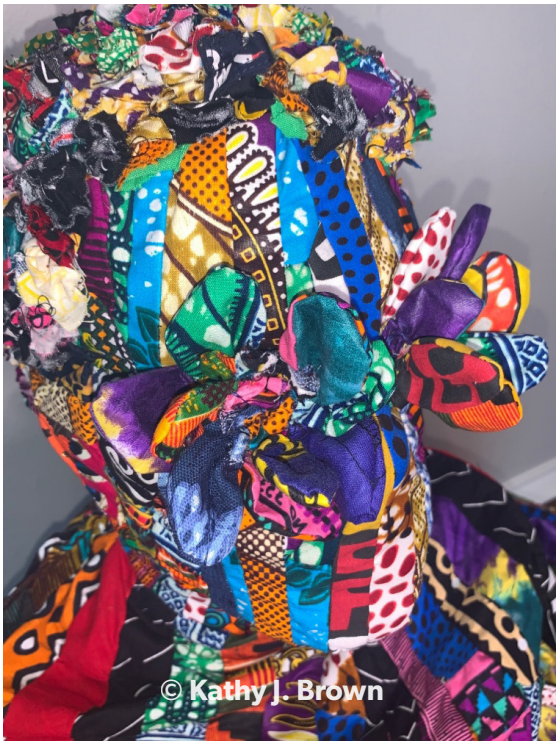
Figures 3, 4, 5
In progress photos: Variations on a theme

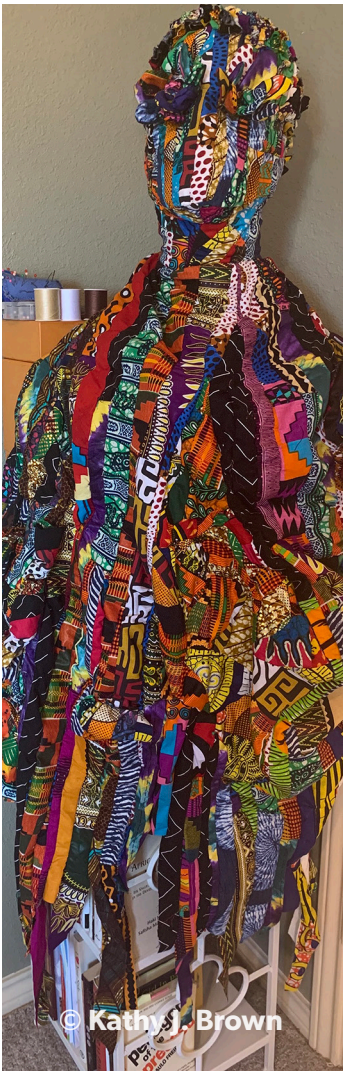


Note. (Figures 3 & 4) April 2021. (Fig. 4) Zipper added. (Figure 5) May 2021: hair complete.

Figures 6 & 7

In progress photos: Variations on a theme





Note. March 2022: updates, embellishments (in progress) of *Variations on a theme* (2021-2022).

Figure 8

In process, April 2021. Variations on a theme.

Figure 9

In process, February 2020.

Note. Work for *Pre and Post Breonna Taylor: Clothes You Can't Remove* and the beginnings of *Pandemic Blanket: Star Dust Monster* (not pictured).

Figures 10 & 11

Note. (Figure 10) [On the right] Title: *Pre and Post Breonna Taylor: Clothes You Can't Remove.* c. 2020-2021, Hand Sewn Fabric Collage, Zipper and Wire on Mannequin Bust. Dimensions: approx. 22"(H) x 15"(D) x 17"(W). "Honoring the collective memory and indignation of everyday black women, like the Fantastic Negrito's (2018) lamentation/rage,'The Suit that won't come off,' my piece morphed into a garment. The mannequin models the clothes, which onlookers attempt to remove/wear. Post-mourning, in the morning, we still choose joy as a revolutionary act." – Artist's Statement, Greater Denton Arts Council's (2021) 34th annual *Materials: Hard + Soft* International Contemporary Craft Competition & Exhibition and the *Soul Renewal* Exhibition.

(Figure 11) [On the left] Title: *Variations on a Theme: Sgt. Issac Woodard and Malice Green (Ase)* c. 2021, Hand Sewn Fabric Collage, Zipper and Wire on Mannequin Bust. Dimensions: approx. 15"(H) x 8"(D) x 15"(W). "We honor Invisible Men/indelible marks/counternarrative/alternative aftermaths/uprisings/social change/Kings/Transatlantic Children of the Mother continent (Newkirk II, 2018). Perennially, we still choose joy." – Artist's Statement from Greater Denton Arts Council (2021) *Soul Art Renewal* Exhibition.

Cultural Research as Contemplative Practice: Stardust Dynasties

Researchers posit that Gullah Geechee are the only African American "subgroup" to have retained African derived cultural traditions (Greene, 2013). How the Gullah Geechee retained African-ness is attributed to the remoteness of the sea islands and the influx of the slave trade. Enslaved peoples involuntarily lived and worked on coastal rice plantations. Due to swamp land and marshes, white enslavers did not live on the plantations "during the season of mosquito-borne diseases" (Matory, 2008, p. 957). Thus the enslaved peoples had some semblance of autonomy—if that is possible for a person in bondage to have autonomy. Matory (2008) additionally stated, "The term 'isolation' summarizes the geographical distance of the Sea Islanders from the mainland. … the year-round paucity of whites, until recently, on the Sea Islands, and legal segregation" (p. 957). Moreover, the arrival of kidnapped Africans to the South Carolina coasts lasted into the 1850's; newly arrived Africans contributed to further diasporic cultural exchanges (Matory, 2008).

Furthermore, over time the Gullah Geechee developed their own "English-based creole vernacular" (Mufwene, 2016, para. 1) which is rooted in the varied diasporic languages of the enslaved Africans (Green, 2013). This language was first researched, documented, and disseminated by Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner, considered to be the first African American linguist, beginning in the late 1920's (Opala, 2000). His research laid the groundwork for further Gullah Geechee studies (Green, 2013). In literature, linguistic aspects of the culture were integrated into Zora Neale Hurston's iconic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Johnson, 2019), *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin in 1934, and folklore stories such as Br'er Rabbit (National Park Service, 2005). Furthermore, Artsmidwestworldfest.org (n.d.) noted, "People who speak Gullah sound like people who speak Krio, one of the common languages spoken among the people from Sierra Leone, West Africa" (para. 6). Green (2013) reported, "Approximately 25% of the words and names can be traced back to a language in Sierra Leone" (p. 574). Furthermore, as the slave trade grew and the need for rice cultivation along the lower eastern coast began, it was discovered that African people along the west coast of the continent, in agrarian communities in countries

such Sierra Leone and Angola, were well versed in rice cultivation. Thusly, researchers posit that Sierra Leone (most notably Mende) is likely the primary birthplace of the South Carolina Gullah Geechee (Green, 2013; Opala, 2000).

The distinction between *Gullah* and *Geechee* as descriptive identifiers differ amongst researchers. Green (2013), citing the work of the National Park Service (2005), reported regional distinctions: "'Gullah' is often used to refer to those who reside along the coastal area of South Carolina, and 'Geechee' is typically used to denote those who reside along the Florida and Georgia Coast" (p. 573). However, Artsmidwestwordfest.com (n.d.) cited African origins as the source of the descriptors:

> The term "Gullah" is said to be a version of the country named Angola, from which nearly half the slaves brought to the Carolina Colony came. Many elders in the Gullah culture believe that the term refers to the African story of the Golas and the Gizzis—two cultural groups living near Liberia during the time of the slave trade that also had large numbers captured and brought to this part of the United States. In South Carolina, this group of African-Americans and the language they speak are referred to as Gullah. In Georgia, they are called Geechee. (para. 3)

Furthermore, Patricia E. Sabree (n.d.), a Savannah, Georgia Gullah Geechee visual artist and former high school art teacher, differentiates based on land proximity:

> ...Geechee derives from those near the Ogeechee river in Georgia. Later on, that term extends to some who live in South Carolina. Geechee is more specific in these areas, but Gullah represents everyone. Therefore, you may see the term Gullah-Geechee for the sake of inclusion. (para. 3)

Whichever is the true origin story, my grandad exclusively identified as Geechee, but for the purpose of this paper we continue with the terminology Gullah Geechee.

Intergalactic Legacies and Wisdom of the Ancestors: Gullah Geechee Artmaking

In my review of the literature, the Gullah Geechee people are most known for sweetgrass basketry, a practice derived from the mother continent. The South Carolina sweetgrass blades are cleaned and the basket is formed from the bottom up, starting with a basket ring, however "the baskets are sewn and not woven…[also] using other natural materials such as palmetto" (Quet, 2020, 21:42). The sweetgrass grows along the river basins of the lower, coastal eastern shore (Ghahramani, et al., 2020; Grabbatin & Halfacre, 2011). However, climate change has adversely affected this centuries-old craft due to land erosion because sweetgrass basketry "depends upon the tidal marshes from which to harvest materials… coastal development and climate change impacts, such as sea-level rise, more frequent storms and hurricanes, and increased coastal erosion are likely to further impact their livelihoods and unique culture" (Ghahramani et al., 2020, p. 2).

In my review of the literature, additional visual art practices were more difficult to find, particularly quilting, fabric art traditions and contemporary art/artists. However, from varied sources, I discovered strip quilting (Crap, n.d.; National Park Service, 2005; Opala, 2000), rag quilting (Chisolm, 2013; Deemallon, 2014), and reverse quilts (Quet, n.d.), and realized the visuality of my artwork had some similarity to strip quilting, which consists of cutting strips of fabric and organizing them into a pattern (see Figure 12). The National Park Service in 2005 (citing the work of David, 1989; Joyner, 1985; Twining & Baird, 1991) documented and reported the historical antecedents of strip quilting:

> Enslaved Africans, who were transported to the Low Country, brought with them a rich heritage of textile art, including a tradition of sewing strips of cloth into larger patterns. When quilting for their own families, however, enslaved women combined their African textile traditions with European quilting methods, thus creating a unique creolized art form. Many of their patterns, particularly the strip quilt, showed a clear continuity with West African textile tradition … .Quilting be-

> gan on the plantations to supplement the blankets that were distributed by masters about every three years. Slave women frequently gathered in the evenings, after completing their work in the fields, to make warm and colorful quilts. Thus, quilting was both a time of work and a time of social interaction. Quilts were usually made in the bright colors of African tradition rather than the softer colors preferred by Europeans … . The most common designs were patchwork, mosaic designs constructed from many types of cloth, although they also made pieced, strip, and appliquéd quilts. (pp. 61-62)

Portrait painter and South Carolina native Kevin Chadwick recreated the practice in a mixed media piece centering a mother and child hanging strip quilts on a clothing line (see Figure 12).

Figure 12
"The Quilter" by Kevin Chadwick

Note. "The Quilter." 30" x 40," Mixed Media on Canvas by Kevin Chadwick. Image courtesy of the artist. IG: kevin_chadwick

Furthermore, contemporary artmaking still includes "Gullah men [who] have continued their wood carving tradition…Gullah women sew quilts organized in strips like African country cloth, and still make their finely crafted baskets" (Opala, 2000, para. 7) to commemorate, document, and commodify.

During a virtual lecture entitled *Zooming in on Gullah Geechee Craft and Cultural Sustainability*, Queen Quet (2020) proclaimed "we are stitching a legacy together, sweetgrass basketry and net fishing are from Africa,… but quilting was repatriated from Gullah Geechee who moved back to Sierra Leone and Freetown, Liberia…stitched over time and within our African cosmology" (Quet, 2020, 19:22). Thusly, I use the phrase *intergalactic legacies* because these art forms began long before our enslavement. However, another researcher found that the Gullah Geechee quilting styles can be linked the Mende tribe of Sierra Leone. The Mende have historically created tapestries from hand dyed fabrics stitched together (quiltofbelonging.ca, 2016).

Implications for Art Education

Culturally relevant education, which permeated the national, mainstream educational landscape in the 1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995), then evolved to culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). Each iteration speaks to the necessity of integrating or centering the students' ethnic visual culture and/or group knowings and histographies into curricula, while still maintaining rigor and the necessary knowledge base. Moreover, in recent years, the term anti-racism is at the forefront of art education. Kraehe and Boyd-Acuff (2021) describe anti-racist pedagogy specifically to be "a commitment to understanding and grappling with racism in classrooms and in one's own life as a teacher" (p. 135). The organization Race Forward (2015) reported anti-racist pedagogy to be "the work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life. Anti-racism tends to be an individualized approach, and set up in opposition to individual racist behaviors and impacts" (p. 25). Additionally, Wolfgang (2019) denotes that culturally sustaining pedagogy aligns with anti-racism:

> A culturally sustaining pedagogy in the arts would be a pedagogy that is actively anti-racist. An actively anti-racist pedagogy is not simply inclusive of [POC] artists. Instead, it would be a curriculum that decenters whiteness by explicitly naming histories harm, erasure and exotification. Decentering whiteness in art education would involve, for many of us, filling in the gaps that formal education in the arts left us with. (p. 24)

I posit the inclusion of Gullah Geechee cultural artmaking as part of an anti-racist art curricula. Quet, in a virtual lecture entitled *Zooming in on Antiracism*, further noted, "silence gives consent, so if you are not speaking against it, it appears you are for it" (Quet & Noon, 2021, 10:30). Aligning with Wolfgang (2019), antiracist advocate and speaker, Holly Noon, in the same virtual lecture, stated, "if you are trying to figure out how to be anti-racist, we have to address history first, before we can get to how we can be anti-racist" (Quet & Noon, 2021, 17:20). Noon also posits, "I think we need to really go and find resources about African civilizations prior to slavery to really understand that people had their own languages and ways of life" (Quet & Noon, 2021, 17:50). During a graduate class I taught in Fall of 2020, we collectively self-defined anti-racist art pedagogy as dialectic, art based, research driven, praxis-laden, counternarrative and that which situates the self (self-study).

In 2020, Rollings penned an iconic Black Lives Matter Open Letter to the National Association of Art Education, comparing an anti-racist approach in art education to the tenants of systems theory, asking the question, "So, *what if?* What if art educators associated with [NAEA] honed in on this broadest definition of art as a meaning-making system—well-suited to generating new understandings in the face of senseless acts of violence and inhumanity?" (para. 14). Additionally, Rolling (2020) offers twelve strategies or "interventions" (para. 13). I posit including Gullah Geechee artmaking into an anti-racist art curricula—encompasses and aligns with at least four of Rolling's twelve interventions: (a) *Constraints* which involve foregrounding social justice in your work; (b) *Buffer Sizes* honors varied backgrounds of different certain groups

expanding the cannon, and conducting your own research; (c) *Delays* denotes counternarrative telling to dismantle stereotypes; and (d) *Transcendence* which moves beyond paradigm shifts to being "born again with new found purpose" (para. 15).

Including the work of the Gullah Geechee people in our curriculum aligns with those frameworks because foregrounding varied American cultures not only broadens the canon for art educators, but also for artists, preservice teachers, teacher educators, and K-12 students. Naming Gullah Geechee visualities and epistemologies not only honors an American story, but American land and resources. The artmaking traditions are rich in narrative, technique, and critical cultural understanding. With anti-racism at the forefront of the field, art education researchers state that liberatory practice should be rooted in truth telling, criticality, culture responsiveness, and praxis (Kraehe & Boyd-Acuff, 2021; Rolling, 2020; Wolfgang, 2019).

I will conclude with a brief overview of suggested K-12 art ideas, which can be adjusted to fit any grade level. For the K-12 practitioner, implementing Gullah Geechee art practices into their curricula as art is a step towards decolonizing their curriculum. For example, a South Carolina art teacher created a painting lesson based on the artwork of Jonathon Greene, a globally renowned contemporary artist and a South Carolina low country native (Stellar, 2017). Jonathon preserves culture by creating images of everyday life through his paintings, "draw[ing] inspiration from his Gullah/Geechee heritage, the people of his experience, and the memories of his youth … [his paintings are] in the permanent collections of several major galleries" (National Park Service, 2005, p. 60-61). A mixed media lesson could feature contemporary, multimedia artist Fletcher Williams III (Williams & Rowell, 2016) as artist exemplar who conceptually honors low country traditions through materiality, symbolism and narrative.

Furthermore, I offer suggestions for fiber art projects such as strip quilting tapestries using no-sew glue, fabric strips with an emphasis on applying symbolism to each fabric piece or pattern, storytelling through the textiles. This could include using examples of authentic Gullah

Geechee strip quilts or artwork that features the tradition (see Figure 12) and researching the themes and history behind the work. Moreover, the lesson should include student exploration and cultural research followed by group dialogue. Students could recreate or reimagine Gullah Geechee artmaking—possibly deviating from the style, but employing the themes and big ideas applied to their own art. Another example could be a cooperative strip quilt—to collectively sew strips of fabric together by teaching basic sewing skills and considering what narratives are told through the work (Knowitall.org, n.d.). Lastly, students could research how climate change and land erosion have impacted the people and visual arts of sea island communities (Goslier, 2018; Grabbatin & Halfacre, 2011; Green, 2013; Matory, 2008; Quet, 2020).

As I close this exploration framed in African-American/American history, African-American present and Africana future, I seek to fill the gap in art education literature about art making derived from the Gullah Geechee. I position Gullah Geechee cultural arts as an approach to anti-racist art pedagogy and multimodal protest art. By sharing my sojourn, my hope is that the reader contemplates their own tacit, ancestral knowledge for their own praxis. In our public or private milieus, we must all work to recognize, name, and dismantle long-held systems and (re)image inclusive, anti-racist pedagogies and practices.

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